PROTEST AND ACTIVISM IN THE SELECT WRITINGS OF ARUNDHATI ROY

Synopsis

(A Research Proposal)

Submitted by

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Title of the Research Plan/Synopsis: *Protest and Activism in the Select Writings of Arundhari Roy*

Introduction: Noted author Arundhari Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* was published in 1997. It took her nearly twenty years to come up with her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). A question arises here: why did it take so long for Arundhati Roy to come up with her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017)? The speculations vary here. Based on one's vision, ideological conviction and inclinations, one may respond to this question accordingly. Seemingly, as a researcher, the reasons I conjecture are: possibly there was an inner turmoil going on in the writer's inner self, the issues at hand were so many not only in terms of number, but also in their scope and approach that she was almost helpless to the question as to what to leave and what to take up. The question of the selection of the 'topic' or the larger 'area' for an author with regard to her/his writings is always of considerable import. One becomes particular with respect to what to take up and what to spare. Possibly, it was the same concern which led to the delay in Arundhari Roy's case, but as of now she has come up with not only the topic, but also the larger area–the stand that of an activist's and theme of 'protest' in her writings ("Arundhati

Roy"). These observations are not drawn speculatively, but, rather, are grounded in published research.

Once Roy was established as an author after the publication of her first novel in the year 1997, she got tremendous fame in her life. Her living standards suddenly grew 'high'. However, these new heights, which she of late acquired by virtue of being an established author, disappointed her. The luxuries of life, in literary critic Ulka Anjaria's words, were rather "unsettling" [because of] the 'global dazzle'" ("The Realist Impulse and the Future of Postcoloniality" 278) to her. In her 1999 book *The Cost of Living,* Anjaria observes, "Roy decided to use her fame for different ends" (278). The luxuries of grand hotels, and precisely, the "global dazzle" did not appeal to her much. This observation by Anjaria is more of a hint on Arundhati Roy channelizing her creative faculties towards becoming an 'activist-author' rather than merely being someone willing to relish the material luxuries of life. This is one of the clues on how Roy's writings have a vested activism in them.

The kind of activism visible in her writings revolve around events such as 'Save the Narmada Movement'–struggle against construction of big dams, and Indian nuclear tests. Her radical approach on some of the highly politicized issues of the present day invites our critical attention. Yet other issues about which she expresses her critical perspective include the insurgency and the counter-insurgency in Kashmir, and the Maoist movements in the 'mainland' India. The kind of realism one sees in her writings is that kind of realism which can be identified with the ground level realities, instead of being something merely bookish, or ideal, or abstract kind of realism.

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Primary Sources: The proposed study undertakes a literary study of the three fictional as well as non-fictional works, namely *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), *The God of Small Things* (1997), and *Azadi* (2022). Chronologically, the first novel taken un in this study is *The God of Small Things* (1997). Revolving around a family set up in Kerala, Roy's debut novel tells the childhood stories of two non-identical twins. Winner of the Booker Prize (in 1997), the novel deals with themes such as the caste system in India, an individual's liberty, the social norms, and the laws of the land. How tiny, insignificant things in life shape and
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define one's socio-cultural realities, is a major concern in this novel. It took nearly four years for the author to write it down. This thesis shall assess and explore the themes of protest in this novel from socio-cultural perspectives.

The second novel taken up in the study is *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). This novel was published twenty years after the publication of her first novel, and the critics have held this novel in high spirits as well. It showcases certain specific grim episodes from the modern period of Indian history, such as the Bhopal disaster, ups and downs vis-a-vis land reforms, the 2002 Godhara train burning incident, and the Kashmir insurgency. Through the narratives revolving around these incidents, she shows how the issues of women and those of the third gender creep in and intersect.

The third and final text taken up for the proposed study is, unlike the first two texts, a non-fiction–a collection of essays published in 2020–the year of the global pandemic. As the title suggests, it revolves around topics such as freedom, citizenship, human values, pandemic etc. An obvious question may arise here: how can a book of non-fiction go hand in hand in a research with the first two being fictional ones? Responding to this dilemma, Roy herself writes, "Some of the essays in this volume have been written through the eyes of a novelist and the universe of her novels. Some of them are about how fiction joins the world and becomes the world" (Introduction 1). During the lockdown period imposed due to the spread of the novel Coronavirus, our world was "passing through a portal" (Introduction 1-2) with some kind of "serious ruptures–social, political, economic and ideological" (Introduction 2). The essays in this collection of hers reflect on the ongoing struggle of the entire human race against the natural forces along with highlighting how the human race always has to protest in serious terms in order to survive. Various meanings associated with the term *Azadi* have been taken up in this collection of essays, which shall be further elaborated in the respective chapters of this thesis. She showcases how her non-fiction casts a different light altogether on a whole range of 'naturalized' assumptions and beliefs of humankind. At the same time, it forces us to re-examine and question, if needed, "the values we have built modern societies on–what we have chosen to worship and what to cast aside" (Introduction 2). Certainly there is a radical approach taken by Roy in penning these non-fictional pieces. In her own words, these essays are "a moment in history recorded

while waiting for a metaphorical runway before the aircraft we're all in took off for an as yet unknown destination" (Introduction 2).

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Literature Review/Review of Literature: This section narrows down the topic and then chooses selectively to review the already published research in the domain of protest and activism with special reference to Arundhari Roy's writings. Since the specific area of study is political activism in Roy's writings, the to-be-reviewed research articles for this study shall be focusing primarily on the political activism in the writings of Arundhati Roy. The criteria for the selection of such sources shall include internet search, library visit, exploring of ShodhGanga etc. The review shall include papers published from 1997 till 2022 on the theme of activism and protest with special reference to Arundhati Roy's works taken up for the study. Subsequently, it intends to read and evaluate these articles thoroughly. In this process it will scrutinize the intentions and assumptions made by the authors of these papers. While processing these articles, it will document in brief the major arguments and ideas expressed in them. In the course of review, it will be focusing on tracing the research gap, and subsequently formulating the thesis statement, or the purpose statement of the study.

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Aims and Objectives: This study intends to explore the following aims and objectives as noted below:

- to explore the essential nature, and various other aspects of the two paradigms of protest and activism
- to have an overview of the theme of activism and protest in Indian Writings in English
- to assess the writings of Arundhati Roy from the perspectives of protest and activism
- to explore the potential reasons behind a writer taking to activism and protest in her/his writings
- to explore both adverse and favorable aspects of activism

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Research Methodology: Primarily, the proposed research intends to incorporate the methodologies of textual analysis and discourse analysis in the course of study. Since discourse analysis is a representative method for analysis of any written, vocal or sign-language-centric mode of signification, this method seems apt in analyzing the literary standpoints in the context of this research as well. Apart from this, since textual analysis is an integral part of any study in literature at large, textual analysis is employed as well. Literary standpoints are often manifestations and reflections of the socio-cultural realities of any society, they can be easily analyzed using discourse and textual analyses. Since discourse analysis is a methodology employing the language-in-use and the practices of the social world out there, it would be very apt to exercise the same in the context of this research. Arundhari Roy's language can be viewed as a form of social practice which influences the socio-cultural and economic practices of the world. Also, language is that container which holds within itself the preconceptions, claims and descriptions of a society. It also carries within it the prescriptions for a society. And amidst all these paradigms, a society creates its own discourses revolving around protest and activism as it has its own methods of materializing or actualizing its own realities, its ways of being, behavior, functioning, progressing, and those of dealing as a community, as a society. Textual analysis in this context seems to be an important methodology in taking up the literary analysis of the texts of Arundhati Roy. Moreover, language creates discourse, and it is through the language alone that the discourse can be analyzed through the means of textual analysis. Hence, language becomes both the vehicle and the tenor of discourse.

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Tentative Chapter Division: The proposed thesis contains five chapters in all. The first chapter is introductory in nature, which casts light on various aspects of the thesis such as Arundhati Roy as a literary writer, her writings and themes therein, the paradigms of protest and activism in general. It further discusses how protest and activism are visible in Indian Writings in English. Subsequently, this relates the two to the writings of Arundhati Roy. It showcases how as a literary author, she takes up protest and activism. It will incorporate within it the themes of protest, in particular the political protest and the activist's stand taken up by the author. The second chapter shall be a review of literature hitherto published on
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Arundhati Roy's writings–both fictional and non-fictional. The third chapter shall be focusing on the engagement of Arundhati Roy's writings with the theme of activism. It would be a literary and textual analysis of the author's writings. The fourth chapter shall be focusing on the repercussions and the outcomes of the protest registered or tendered by the author. It will showcase how various kinds of protests are taken up by Roy in her writings, namely social, political, cultural and last but not the least the protest revolving around political economy. It would focus on how her writings have backfired, how they have had a reaction, a boomerang kind of effect, and at the same time, how they have induced a 'soft' ideological change in the socio-cultural circles of the society in a certain manner. The fifth chapter shall conclude the thesis showing how Roy is a writer of protest and activism in her own ways. It would sum up the observations, the key findings, and the conclusions of the thesis along the two paradigms. The fifth chapter shall be followed by the list of works cited in the research.

Summary and Conclusions: This section shall present in brief the key findings of the proposed research plan. However, the key findings shall already have been incorporated in the fifth chapter, i.e. the concluding chapter of the thesis, there shall hardly remain any need for a separate section on summary and conclusions of the research. In a nutshell, the proposed research plan intends to undertake a literary study of noted author Arundhati Roy's select fictional and non-fictional writings. In particular, it will undertake the theme of activism and protest in her writings. The methodology of discourse analysis shall be used in the study. The tentative chapter division has already been discussed in the relevant section of the proposal.

References/List of Works Cited: The final section of the research shall be documentation of the sources used, or referred to in the course of the research. It will incorporate all the sources, such as articles, books, book chapters, pieces of news, magazine articles, interviews and other social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube etc. Whatever sources the researcher shall come across in his research journey in this research domain, shall be documented as per the guidelines documented in the MLA Handbook, 9th edition.

Works Cited:

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Further Readings:

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